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A Brief Study of Edward Albee

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Albee was born on March 12, 1928 in Washington DC and was adopted by Reed and Frances Albee of New York, who were the millionaire owners of a chain of theaters. Named after his foster grandfather, Edward Franklin Albee who started this chain of theaters, Albee grew up in a world of servants but his family life left something to be desired. His mother was a stubborn lady and his father a taciturn which made the relation of the two imbalanced. Moreover, Albee's own relationship with his parents was an awkward one. This uneasy relationship shared with his parents can be easily witnessed in the portrayal of family in his plays. C.W.E. Bigsby rightly remarks, "It is not too difficult to see in his foster-parents elements of the characters he was later to create in *The American Dream*" (Albee 01). In most of his plays he has coloured the husband-wife relationship as the most troubled one. Only the portrayal of Grandma Cotta was the one, in his real life, who loved and understood him and with whom he really felt at home. He drew her in *The American Dream* and dedicated *The Sandbox* to her after her death in 1960.

A strong-willed, self-made and rebellious boy, Albee educationally was really poor. His academic record was extremely bad, the reason being, his parents expected him to become something he was not and desired not. Shifted from one school to another such as- Rye County Day School to Lawrence Ville(NJ) and then to Valley Forge Military Academy (PA) which was, for Albee, Valley Forge Concentration Camp, Albee remained the same, concentrating more on his writings rather than his studies. In 1944 Albee joined Choate School and began to take his writing seriously. Encouraged by an English teacher in Choate, Albee wrote some poems, short-stories and novels. After graduating from Choate in 1946, Albee attended Trinity College, Hartford where after a year and a half he was excluded from further attendance. Albee's constant clashes with his mother due to his poor performance in studies grew tension and misunderstanding between both of them and finally, in 1948, after a bitter argument with his mother Albee left home for good because his family members were 'very sophisticated' and he was 'a tot'. During the bohemian decade or 'pudding years', as Albee prefers to call these ten years between his twentieth and thirtieth

birthday, he took a series of temporary jobs because he just got an inheritance of \$ 250 a month from his grandmother. These petty jobs brought Albee into contact with the reality of American social scene and helped him to become a mature writer.

Albee started writing at a very young age but was taken seriously after the publication of *The Zoo Story* (1958) and came in limelight after his first Broadway production – *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). He wrote his first play *Aliqueen* at the age of twelve but his first available play is *Schism*, which he wrote at the age of eighteen at the suggestion of his friend, Noel Farrand who was unhappy about the restrictive Roman Catholic attitudes he found at school. He said, "I asked Edward if he could write me a play that would satirize some of these Catholic attitudes" (qtd. in Gussow 60). This play deals with the life of Michael Joyce and Alice Manohan. Alice is an Irish Catholic girl who deserts her dying grandmother and elopes with Michael. The young couple leaves consoling each other and says: "We are not wrong . . . we are just searching for happiness" (*Schism* 110). The real subject of this play is lack of compassion which underlies both the authoritarianism of the Catholic Church and the young generation's revolt. Albee attacks the Catholic principles through the mouthpiece of a young man who criticizes Alice's principles. He takes her crucifix away from her and explains the reason of this act very bravely and intelligibly:

It's like a heavy chain around your neck, weighing you down so you can't stand up straight and really see God. I want to help you stand up straight. (*Schism* 95)

On one hand, the play lambasts Catholic attitudes and on the other, it attacks the concept of American Dream, which justifies inhumanity in the name of bright and happy future.

At this time, Albee was not sure which genre of art was his true passion. Albee started his career as a poet at the age of six and continued writing poetry for the next twenty years without success. After realizing his limitations as a poet Albee remarked, "I never felt like a poet; I felt like someone who was writing

poetry" (qtd. in Roudane, *Understanding* 3). After poetry he "attempted novel twice" (Roudane, *Understanding* 3) but even this genre was not in accord with him. His connection with William Flanagan, a young composer with whom he shared his apartment after leaving his home, brought him into contact with W.H. Auden and Thornton Wilder. Auden and Wilder offered some kind of critical appreciation of his works. It was Wilder, who was the first to suggest that Albee should concentrate his attention on playwriting. Then after a period of severe depression Albee gave up his job and with his thirtieth birthday approaching he sat down to write *The Zoo Story*, "on a wobbly table in the kitchen of the apartment . . . I finished *The Zoo Story* in three weeks . . ." (Skow 32). *The Zoo Story* (1958) debuted at Berlin Festival in September 1959 on a program with Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. *The Zoo Story* attacks so directly the indifference and sterility of contemporary American life that with this play Albee became an off-Broadway sensation. Albee says surprisingly about the success of this play:

Something very, very interesting happened with the writing of that play. I didn't discover suddenly that I was a playwright; I discovered that I had been a playwright all my life, but didn't know it because I hadn't written plays . . . And so when I wrote *The Zoo Story*, I was able to start practicing my 'nature' fully. (Roudane, *Understanding* 3-4)

This play portrays the lives of Peter and Jerry who represent two extremes of society – rich and poor – and through their lives it gives the message that alienation is a common element of life in metropolitan cities like New York. This play is written in the manner of the Greek tragedy i.e., its plot has a cause-effect sequence, reversal and discovery.

Edward Albee, being a post-nuclear writer, has experienced the placidity of American success myth along with the various social, political, historical and economic upheavals caused by it. He is well aware that the idea of American Dream is so deeply rooted in Americans' minds and hearts that they are unable to face reality without illusion. Every writer, as T. S. Eliot puts it, should be conscious of his time. Edward Albee shows his consciousness about his time and, therefore, is able to dramatize the universal problems faced by man during the second half of twentieth century. Since Albee has a large personality he is able to become impersonal. So to say, Albee has started writing with a social cause i.e., to amend his society and to make his civilization understand that to accept reality is the best way to lead a self-contented and peaceful life. His dramas make it clear that the success myth, untouched by failure, is just a lie. His plays moved the placid Eisenhower to turbulent 1960s.

Sixties, the decade Albee became famous, was intellectually and culturally a radical period that revolted against the conservative ethos and the intellectual smugness of the 50s. The theatrical radicalism of Sixties revolted against the popular

theater for promoting an uncritical and simplistic mass taste which emasculated the human individual and stultified the dramatic medium.

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